

MONTHLY POLICY REVIEW

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NATIONAL

Lawmakers slam White House 'attitude problem' (Reuters 3/15/2002) – Legislators from both parties criticized the White House on issues related to accountability of funds authorized by Congress. OMB Budget Director Mitchell Daniels, Jr., who characterized Congress' motto as: "Don't just stand there, spend something," was grilled before the House Appropriations committee. The particular focus was how funds for the war on terrorism were being spent, but lawmakers took the opportunity to question Daniels on other practices and comments. Criticism came from both sides of the aisle, including Rep. Ernest Istook (R-OK), who chairs the Appropriations subcommittee on Treasury and General Government, which controls the White House's budget. Rep. Istook said that if the White House is not forthcoming with information on how funds are being spent, Congress may consider withholding funds from the White House. The White House maintains that Homeland Security advisor Tom Ridge does not need to testify before Congress because he is a presidential advisor, not a Cabinet secretary or agency head. [Comment: the terrorism question is part of a larger contest between Congress and the Executive Branch, including public criticism over Congressional earmarks on appropriations and Vice-President Cheney's refusal to reveal conversations relating to the Administration's development of their National Energy Policy proposal.]

Nickles expresses frustrations (Oklahoman 3/24/2002) – Senator Don Nickles expressed his frustrations at the way legislation is handled in the Senate. Nickles, a 22-year veteran of the Senate, said partisanship was impeding judicial confirmations and legislation. He particularly targeted the partisan defeat of judicial nominee Charles Pickering and the way legislation was not following the norms of the Committee process. Both the farm bill and energy bill were crafted through floor amendments rather than going through the traditional committee process.

Back to surpluses (Knight Ridder News Service 3/7/2002) – The rapid recovery from the recession has turned projected deficits into surpluses. The Congressional Budget Office had predicted a \$21 billion deficit in the current fiscal year and \$14 billion deficit in FY03. Revised figures show a \$5 billion surplus this year and \$6 billion surplus in FY03.

Terrorism funds cause concerns (Oklahoman 3/25/2002) – Terrorism-fighting funds would come through FEMA rather than the traditional Department of Justice route, according to a plan put forth by Homeland Security Advisor Tom Ridge. The funds, totaling \$3.5 billion, would be dedicated for first-responder preparedness. Some of the funding would come from existing Department of Justice programs, including the popular Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), which provides manpower funds to small communities. Rural officials are concerned that different groups, such as state agencies and firefighters, will be the primary beneficiaries of the funds.

Energy Bill (AP 3/14/2002) – The Senate rejected a proposal that would substantially have increased fuel economy standards for vehicles by 2015. Federal law requires fleet averages of 27.5 mpg for sedans and 20.7 mpg for SUV's minivans and pickups. The fuel economy regulations have not changed in 15 years, although the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHSTA) has the authority to raise fuel standards without legislation (it had been prohibited from doing so from 1996-2001).

Farm Bill (AP 3/5/2002) – Economists from the University of Missouri, Iowa State University, and Texas A&M University compared the effects of agricultural policy under the House and Senate versions of the Farm Bill. They found that the Senate version would provide a larger boost to growers income in the short-term, but the House legislation provides higher income after 2003. For the current year, the Senate legislation would provide \$7.1 billion subsidies while the House version would provide \$0.8 billion. By 2004, the House bill would provide \$2 billion in annual subsidies more than the Senate version. Both versions may exceed the \$19.1 billion annual limit in subsidies that is allowed under the World Trade Organization.

(AP 3/20/2002) – Reports from conference committee are that legislators hope to complete the process within the next month. Under a framework agreed upon by both Houses, subsidies would increase by 70% and land conservation expenditures would increase by 80% over the next decade. The bills are H.R. 2646 and S. 1731.

AGENCY NEWS

Every budget tells a story (Rob Norton, Fortune Magazine in Washington Post Op-Ed 3/10/2002) – The Bush Administration’s budget may be “the most pronounced shift in governing philosophy since the early days of the Reagan Administration.” The overall budget remains nearly constant as a percentage of GDP – projected to level off at 18.3% in 2007, or about where it was in 2001. Critics have attacked the ‘cuts’ in discretionary spending, but the budget is actually much greater than the 16.8% of GDP projected in the Clinton budget projections for the same time frame. What is unique about the budget is not the overall numbers, or even the total level of discretionary budget. It is how the funds are allocated. The Bush Administration is evaluating each program, rewarding those it deems most effective and eliminating those it views as ineffective. This shifts money within an agency, such that its overall budget remains steady but it becomes a more effective, and more responsive, agency. Most agencies will see net budget increases of 1-3% over the next five years. The exceptions are Health and Human Services, which will receive a 9.4% increase, mainly for bioterrorism and the National Institutes of Health, and Labor, Transportation, and the Army Corps of Engineers that will decrease by 7-10%, mostly from elimination of Congressional earmarks. The new governing philosophy is not ideological, it is results-oriented. Any program that can prove itself to be effective and efficient has a chance at substantial budget increases, while even those programs that may be ideologically close to the Republican party may be in jeopardy if they are not effective. Thus, agencies like Health and Human Services, the National Science Foundation, and the Social Security Administration post large gains in a conservative administration’s budget.

EPA to cut Superfund sites cleanup (AP 3/13/2002) – EPA chief Christie Whitman announced cuts in funding to cleanup Superfund sites. The cuts come because of the complexity and expense of several large projects and declining revenues into the fund allocated to cleanup costs. Funding comes primarily from taxes on pollution-causing business, but Congress and the Bush Administration have been reluctant to extend the tax. Revenues from the tax have decreased from \$3.6 billion in 1996 to a projected \$28 million in 2003. This year’s projected \$1.3 billion costs will require \$700 million funding from the Treasury. Anticipated needs over the next decade are \$14 to \$16.4 billion. It is expected that Tar Creek in northeastern Oklahoma will remain near the top of the list, but cleanup of other, smaller sites may be postponed. The EPA notes 70 percent of contaminated sites are cleaned up by the corporations responsible; government fines may be triple actual cleanup costs should the company lose in court.

Corps budget may postpone projects (Oklahoman 3/18/2002) – The Bush Administration’s budget for the Army Corps of Engineers, \$4.175 billion instead of the requested \$6 billion, would trim the Tulsa District office budget by \$12 million. The Tulsa District office oversees 38 lakes, of which 30 are located in Oklahoma. The result would likely be postponing major projects, including a planned \$3.1 million upgrade at Canton Lake. The Tulsa District budget has actually exceeded allocations over the last several years. Most postponed projects would be related to renovations of campground facilities, shoreline erosion control, and non-essential maintenance activities.

STATE / LOCAL

March budget allocations down 6.6% (Oklahoman 3/10/2002) – The ever-increasing revenue shortfall forced a 6.6% across-the-board cut in state agency budgets for March. Agency cuts are projected to be 4% for the remaining months of FY02. The cuts are attributable to a \$95.5 million revenue shortfall, originally estimated at \$70.5 million in December 2001. All agencies, including education and corrections, will need to take the budget cuts to balance FY02, even though Governor Keating declared some agencies off-limits for FY03 cuts. Legislators are seeking supplemental funding to offset some of the cuts, especially for education which has taken an additional hit from the state gross production tax fund. The Fiscal Year 2003 budget will likely have an across-the-board reduction of 5-7%, with some agencies able to recoup some of those losses through supplemental appropriations.

State schools face \$22 million cut (Oklahoman 3/18/2002) – School superintendents across the state are finding ways to trim \$22 million from their Fiscal Year 2002 budgets. With only 60 days left in the school year, implementing cuts is proving very difficult for some school districts. Several school districts enacted hiring freezes and personnel reductions in anticipation of coming cuts. The Oklahoma City school district, which must cut \$1 million from its budget, implemented ‘cost-saving measures’ earlier, and Ponca City ordered a 5 percent budget cut in December. Ponca City superintendent Bill White said: “I’ve been a superintendent a long time, I figured out several months back this was coming.” Schools are looking at reductions in force for the next school year in light of a projected \$350 million state budget shortfall.

University projects funded (Oklahoman 3/19/2002) – The House approved funding for the Oklahoma Weather Center at OU and for the bioterrorism research laboratories at OSU. The plan, which taps funds from a Corporation Commission fund for cleanup of underground storage tanks, passed the House 68-30. The amendment to use the petroleum cleanup fund passed 53-44. The Senate had approved the legislation the previous week. Under the legislation, the one-cent gasoline tax will be extended for an additional two years, providing a net monetary increase to the fund, even when allowing for the short-term re-allocation of funds to the universities. Lawmakers expressed concerns over using the fund for something other than its intended purposes. “The reason people distrust the Legislature is because we do these kinds of shenanigans” said Rep. Wayne Pettigrew (R-Edmond). After a two-hour debate, the legislation was passed and sent to the Governor, who promptly signed it.

Redistricting Plan passes conference committee (Oklahoman 3/12/2002) – Democratic legislative leaders agreed on a U.S. Congressional redistricting plan that would give each incumbent a separate district. Oklahoma loses a House seat this year, but Wes Watkin’s retirement avoids having to place two incumbents into direct competition. The proposed plan creates 5 districts, basically northwest Oklahoma, southwest, southeast, northeast, and Tulsa / north central. Oklahoma City would be split into three separate districts, with a finger extending from Southeast Oklahoma to include Rep. Istook’s home. Rep. Watts would retain most of his original district in southwest Oklahoma. Observers speculate that if such districts were to become law, Rep. Istook may move to run against Rep. Lucas, who gains much of Istook’s old district. Redistricting plans are being challenged in state court, which has scheduled a hearing for May 13.

School ratings published (Oklahoman 3/23/2002) – The state Education Department released the scores for the Academic Performance Index (API). Schools are rates on a 1,500 point scale, which factors in test scores, attendance, dropout rates, graduation rates, college entrance scores, college remediation rates, and college-preparatory classes. Scores in Oklahoma ranged from under 200 at two Tulsa elementary schools to eight schools that received perfect marks. Scores for school districts ranged from a low of 403 (Kinta K-12 in Haskell County) to 1,420 (Moffett K-8 in Sequoyah County). Norman K-12 averaged 1145 overall, with scores ranging from 952-1416. Each school, school district, and the state overall will have a 5% growth target each year, based upon the difference between each score and the perfect 1,500. Full ratings are available from NewsOk at: <http://www.newsok.com/images/api.htm>.

State science teacher urges more resources (Oklahoman 3/24/2002) – Jana D. Rowland, an elementary school teacher at Hydro-Eakly Public Schools, urged the U.S. House Committee on Science to provide more support to rural science and math teachers. “Teachers in rural areas often feel isolated and alone and struggle to find necessary equipment and supplies” said Rowland. She advocated federal funds for regional universities to create science resource centers to provide resources and training to teachers. Rowland is a winner of a presidential award for excellence in mathematics and science teaching. She testified at the invitation of Rep. Frank Lucas (R-Cheyenne), who serves on the Committee.

Energy Security Act fails (Oklahoman 3/5/2004) – Rep. John Wright (R-Broken Arrow) introduced legislation that would help diversify Oklahoma’s energy production. The bill would allow faster depreciation of new or retrofitted coal-fired plants. The intent was to make coal plants more competitive with natural gas plants, as a hedge against future natural gas price spikes. Opponents voiced concerns that faster depreciation would hurt ratepayers. House members allowed Rep. Wright to strike the Bill’s title, which keeps the Bill alive while the author makes some changes.

State taxes among most regressive (Oklahoman 3/20/2002) – A study by the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau showed that Oklahoma’s standard deduction and exemptions are among the lowest in the nation. “If you do not itemize in Oklahoma, we sock it to you” said state Senator Angela Monson (D-Oklahoma City). Standard deductions and exemptions have not risen since 1982, when the oil bust hit the Oklahoma economy. Until that time they had tracked federal levels closely. This year, the personal exemption is \$1,000 and the standard deduction is \$1,000 to \$2,000, depending on status and income. The federal exemption is \$2,900 and standard deduction is \$4,500 for individuals or \$7,200 for married couples. The low deductions means the maximum tax rate of 7% kicks in at \$10,000, making Oklahoma one of the most regressive states for personal income taxes. The Wisconsin study showed that twelve states offered standard deductions equal to the federal levels and ten states offered no deductions. Of the states offering deductions, Oklahoma’s was among the smallest. Efforts to increase the standard deductions, led by Rep. Dan Webb (R-Oklahoma City) have failed in the legislature over the last several years. Senate Bill 930, which would gradually increase the exemption to \$3,000 per person by 2010, recently cleared the House Revenue and Taxation Committee. The bill is authored by Sen. Mike Johnson (R-Kingfisher) and co-authored by Rep. Clay Pope (D-Loyal).

Governor appoints Board members (Oklahoman 3/8/2002) – Governor Keating nominated V. Burns Hargis to the Board of Regents for Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical Colleges and Tulsa businessman Jon Stuart to the University of Oklahoma Board of Regents. Hargis would serve an eight-year term and Stuart would serve a seven-year term. Stuart would succeed outgoing Board member Robin Siegfried. Senate confirmation is required for both nominations. Gilmer Capps was reappointed to the Board of Regents of Western Oklahoma State Colleges for another seven-year term. Capps' appointment also requires Senate confirmation.

Chancellor search underway (Oklahoman 2/11/2002) - Names that have been suggested as replacements for Hans Brisch, Chancellor of Higher Education, include Republican political consultant Tom Cole and Democrat Glen Johnson, former Speaker of the Oklahoma House of Representatives. A national search will be conducted, but will not be completed until next year. The State Regents for Higher Education will conduct the search. Governor Keating appointed seven of the nine State Regents, but not all of his appointments were Republicans.

State Chamber of Commerce picks V.P. for Technology (Oklahoman 3/6/2002) – The State Chamber of Commerce named Jim Mason Vice President of its technology department. Mason will serve as a legislative lobbyist and work closely with technology companies to determine legislative needs. Mason, a certified economic developer, was President and Chief Executive of the Stillwater Chamber of Commerce and Executive Director of the Stillwater Industrial Foundation since 1993.

BUSINESS / TECHNOLOGY

Economy Improving (Washington Post 3/15/2002) – Recent economic growth appears stronger than predicted. In February, industrial production posted its biggest gain in the past 18 months, leading signs of a rapid recovery from the recession. The manufacturing sector posted a 0.4 percent gain, its largest since June 2000. Industrial production gains follow positive reports of consumer confidence and low inflation. The Fed, citing signs of a recovery, opted to maintain current interest rates, after cutting the prime rate eleven times in the past year. The technology and telecommunications sector is well into recovery, marked by new venture capital investments and declining layoffs and bankruptcies.

What Recession? (AP 3/20/2002) – Wyoming has not only avoided the recession, but is handing out \$237 million in new spending over the next two years. The boon comes from natural resource taxes, which is a primary support of the state budget. Wyoming has no personal, corporate, or business income taxes. Twelve percent of the budget is financed by interest off a \$2 billion endowment the state made from mineral rights.

OPEC holds the line on oil production (AP 3/15/2002) – OPEC cuts in production over the last several months have contributed to lower supplies on the market, driving prices to a range of \$22-28 per barrel. OPEC announced that it would maintain production at current levels at least until its June meeting. Reduced production, combined with global economic recovery, has contributed to less supplies and recent price increases for gasoline and other petroleum-based products.

Natural gas prices stay down, no wait (AP 3/13/2002) – Natural gas inventories remain at record highs and industrial demand is lagging, leading to a surplus of natural gas supplies and low prices. The AP quotes sources as characterizing the amount of storage as “unbelievable,” at its highest levels since 1992. Gas prices are expected to remain steady at \$2.04 per 1,000 cubic feet, about half the cost of last year. Two weeks after this story appeared, the Oklahoman (3/30/2002) reported that the gas-price index jumped to \$3.32 per thousand cubic feet. The boost is attributed to concerns over Mideast oil production, anticipated demands from gas-fired electricity generators, and disappointing returns on gas exploration and development.

(Oklahoman 3/19/2002) – Gas production in Oklahoma declined from January to November 2001, compared to the same period the previous year, but not as much as anticipated. The January – October numbers showed an 11% decrease over the previous year, but the new numbers showed only a 5.2% decrease, surprising analysts. Crude production was down 4.8% for January – November, but not as much as the 7.5% January – October numbers had indicated.

Williams settles debts (Oklahoman 3/20/2002) – In two separate deals, Tulsa-based Williams borrowed \$1.5 billion and sold a pipeline and preferred stock to Berkshire Hathaway, which is chaired by Warren Buffet, for another \$1.24 billion. Much of the debt was related to Williams Communications Group, a former subsidiary. The Berkshire Hathaway deal helped Williams obtain a lower finance rate, although it was still much higher than they would have liked. Close scrutiny following the Enron collapse has tightened the credit market for many energy industry companies.

State Congressional delegation actively promotes small businesses (Oklahoman 3/14/2002) – the Small Business Survival Committee ranks Oklahoma’s Congressional delegation as fifth in support of small business. Oklahoma received a score of 92 percent in support of small business legislation. Scores ranged from Idaho (100%) to Massachusetts (0%). Despite the support at the federal level, Oklahoma placed only 28th overall in the “Small Business Survival Index”. The Index uses 17 indices and costs that affect small businesses, including various taxes, crime rates, electricity costs, minimum wages, and number of bureaucrats employed in each state. More information is at www.sbosc.org.

Spaceport contract approved (Oklahoman 3/14/2002) – A contract was signed between the Oklahoma Space Industry Development Authority and the Southwestern Oklahoma Development Authority (SWODA) to manage Oklahoma’s new spaceport near Burns Flat. The first launch from the spaceport was scheduled for March 23, but high winds forced a delay.

Microsoft lawsuit may extend beyond Windows (Washington Post 3/26/2002) – Nine states and the District of Columbia are continuing litigation against Microsoft after rejecting the U.S. Justice Department’s settlement. The litigants have asked District Court Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly to force Microsoft to disclose software code, which enables outside developers to write competing applications that work with Microsoft’s systems, for hand-held devices, interactive television boxes, Web services and server systems. Microsoft argues that the suit should only apply to its Windows operating system. Observers look to this case as a critical juncture in creating new legal interpretations of monopoly laws as they apply to new technology.

New modeling method equals supercomputers, costs less (UniSci 3/14/2002) - Researchers at the University of Buffalo devised a way to use large eddy simulations (LES) to obtain results similar to direct numerical simulation (DNS) of turbulent flows. "DNS provides incredibly detailed results on phenomena that occur over very small time and length scales," Peyman Givi explained, "but you need days and sometimes months of supercomputer time to obtain results and they are basic research-type results, providing information on every detailed aspect of the flow." LES uses filtered data as input, but is able to obtain detail comparable to DNS. For example, he explained, if you wanted to create a weather map for Buffalo, you would not need to know the temperature and barometer and other measurements for every single centimeter in the city. Instead, the readings foreach square mile would be sufficient. "If you do it right, the filtered values will be the same as those obtained from the filtered DNS data, assuming such data are available," said Givi. "The advantage is you can perform LES on your workstation with a fast turnaround time and obtain reliable results."

<http://unisci.com/stories/20021/0314023.htm>

DOE Science Grid will be activated two years early (UniSci 3/27/2002) – DOE’s National Energy Research Scientific Computing Center (NERSC) has been collaborating with IBM to create network of supercomputers that would be accessible to scientists around the country. The Science Grid will be available by December 2002, two years ahead of schedule. The Grid joins clusters of servers together over the Internet and links large physical databases, such as those at Berkeley Lab, Argonne, Oak Ridge and Pacific Northwest national laboratories.

<http://unisci.com/stories/20021/0327024.htm>

WEATHER

EL NIÑO continues to develop (NOAA 3/7/2002) – El Nino conditions continue to develop across the equatorial Pacific Ocean. NOAA reports a 2 degree centigrade warming along the Peruvian coast during February and an associated decline in cold-water anchovies.

<http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories/s875.htm>

NOAA reports droughts may linger in east / west (NOAA 3/14/2002) – Despite the return of spring rains along the Eastern seaboard and mountain West, drought effects are likely to continue for some time. NOAA characterizes the drought as so severe that “months of normal-to-above-normal precipitation are necessary to end it.” Snow cover in the western mountains is only half of normal in many places, suggesting water-supply problems later this summer. USA Today (3/28/2002) reports many rivers in the Northeast reaching the lowest flow levels in the last 30-80 years. Some relevant impacts cited include:

- New York City reservoir storage is at 50 percent.
- Precipitation in Washington, D.C. is 70 percent below normal for the September to February period—a 13-inch deficit.
- North-central Montana is in its sixth year of drought with precipitation less than half of normal. Winter wheat production was the lowest since 1940.

The U.S. Drought Outlook through June 2002 shows slow improvement in some areas, but drought likely to persist across Montana and Wyoming and the Southwest. The NOAA forecast calls for likely improvement across northwestern Oklahoma and the Panhandle, which has been in a severe drought that began in June 2001.

<http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories/s877.htm>

Drought affecting area lakes (Oklahoman 3/30/2002) – Kaw Lake, Canton Lake, Foss Lake, Lake Skiatook, and Fort Cobb Lake are all below normal levels. An ongoing drought since June 2001 has dropped lake levels and water supplies across northwestern and north central Oklahoma. Hulah Lake, which provides water for Bartlesville, is particularly low, is nearly out of storage supply. The low levels are not a cause for concern, however. Lake levels usually reach their lowest levels in early spring, just before the rainy season arrives. The state’s major reservoirs, including Lake Eufalua, Lake Keystone, and Lake Texoma, are all above normal.

Bartlesville seeks voluntary water restrictions (Oklahoman 3/14/2002) – Dwindling water supplies from Hulah Lake and the Caney River have officials in Bartlesville concerned. Dry weather over the last several months have threatened the city’s water supplies. Residents are being asked to curtail water usage. The request includes the city of Dewey and rural water districts.

Power restored after ice storm (AP 3/9/2002) – The last of the 255,000 residents who lost power during the January ice storm was re-connected on March 7, nearly 40 days after the event. Cimarron Cooperative’s general manager Tom Garrett said cleanup will continue through most of this year. The Associated Press reports that storm-related damage to public and private property could exceed \$150 million.

OG&E reports \$140 million ice-storm losses (Oklahoman 3/22/2002) – OG&E is seeking federal assistance for its ice-storm related losses. FEMA does not grant recovery costs to investor-owned utilities, but OG&E found such federal subsidies were given in a 1998 Northeastern U.S. ice storm. OG&E was denied FEMA funding, but they are seeking assistance from the Oklahoma Congressional delegation for funds. Rep. Ernest Istook has requested \$43 million in federal disaster assistance for OG&E, equivalent to the assistance provided to rural electric cooperatives and municipal power authorities. Otherwise, OG&E will seek a rate increase from the Corporation Commission to cover the losses, in addition to the \$22 million rate hike request already before the Commission. The surcharge would add “several dollars” to the average electric utility bill for 9-10 years. OG&E self-insures for losses, budgeting about \$5 million per year.

Kay County cleanup costs refused (Oklahoman 3/14/2002) – FEMA declined again to cover the submitted cleanup costs for Kay County. Kay County hired a contractor for ice-storm debris removal at nearly twice the cost of the lowest bidder. FEMA will only reimburse 75% of the cost at the rate of the lowest bidder, which it called the “reasonable cost.” State Auditor Clifton Scott found the county followed proper procedures when selecting the high bidder, but FEMA’s coordinating officer found the bid requirement that contractors begin work within 24 hours to be unwarranted.

State has reputation for being prepared (Oklahoman 3/12/2002) – When it comes to dealing with disasters, Oklahomans know what to do. Portions of Oklahoma have been declared federal disaster areas five times in the past sixteen months. Oklahoma gained national recognition for its response to the 1995 Murrah Building bombing. That image has been reinforced by how well it has handled other disasters, including the May 3, 1999 tornadoes. Oklahomans are regularly invited to teach courses on emergency management, response, and recovery, according to Michelann Ooten of the state Department of Civil Emergency Management. The experience Oklahoma possesses ranges from emergency workers to health care providers to state officials who know how to get assistance for disaster victims. [Comment: this article appears to have been generated by the state ODCEM. While it discusses preparation and national recognition, nowhere do they mention OK-FIRST – a nationally-recognized award-winning program that has been proven to save lives when disasters strike. Any state can claim expertise; Oklahoma has proven it. This point needs to be better emphasized to state and local emergency management officials so citizens (and legislators) know the value they are getting by supporting programs such as OK-FIRST.]

CLIMATE

Larsen B ice shelf collapses (Washington Post 3/20/2002) – An Antarctic ice shelf the size of Rhode Island disintegrated over a 35-day period, beginning January 31. Scientists had expected the ice shelf, which had been in existence for 12,000 years, to disintegrate but were surprised by the rapidity of its collapse. Scientists believe the cause was an unusually warm summer that increased the rate of ice melt, filling cracks which then fractured when the weather cooled. Scientists are uncertain of whether the breakup is related to global warming. Temperatures in the Antarctic Peninsula have increased over the last several decades, but have declined elsewhere on the continent.

Global warming nothing to sneeze at (UniSci 3/21/2002) – Researchers at Harvard Medical School report a 61% increase in ragweed pollen when carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is doubled from current levels. A similar study in North Carolina found a tripling of pine cones and seeds. The impacts of increased carbon dioxide may not only be an increase of allergens, but it may skew the competitive relationship among plants, favoring “weedy species.”

<http://unisci.com/stories/20021/0321022.htm>

ENVIRONMENT

Governor receives environmental award (Oklahoman 3/14/2002) – Governor Keating and 16 other legislators were given environmental awards by the Oklahoma Family Farm Alliance, the Oklahoma Sierra Club, and the Oklahoma Wildlife Federation. Keating was selected for the award based upon his vetoes of two bills that would have threatened Oklahoma's water quality and assisted hog farm development. Senator Paul Muegge (D-Tonkawa) and Rep. Debbie Blackburn (D-Oklahoma City) received awards for the best voting records in the legislature. Other awards were presented to Reps. Jack Bonny (D-Burns Flat), Kevin Cox (D-Oklahoma City), Mary Easley (D-Tulsa), Charles Gray (D-Oklahoma City), Al Lindley (D-Oklahoma City), Bill Nations (D-Norman), Bill Paulk (D-Oklahoma City), Opio Toure (D-Oklahoma City), and Russ Roach (D-Tulsa). Senators receiving awards included Senator Bernest Cain (D-Oklahoma City), Angela Monson (D-Oklahoma City), James Williamson (R-Tulsa), Cal Hobson (D-Lexington), and Nancy Riley (R-Tulsa).

Sardis Water Sales (Oklahoman 3/7/2000) – House Joint Resolution 1038 would require a statewide election before approval of water sales to a neighboring state. The bill relates to recent controversy over a plan to sell water from Sardis Lake to Texas. The deal died when Texas and Oklahoma were unable to agree on a price. The bill, if passed by the Senate and signed by the Governor, would be referred to a vote as a constitutional amendment. The bill was authored by Rep. Mike Mass (D-Hartshorne), who lives near Lake Sardis, and Senator Bruce Price (D-Hinton).

(Oklahoman 3/8/2002) – House Bill 2895, authored by Rep. Debbie Blackburn (D-Oklahoma City) and Senator Kevin Easley (D-Broken Arrow) would prohibit any water sales exceeding 8 million gallons annually until a study is done. The bill would create a blue ribbon panel to study Oklahoma's water needs. The bill, as introduced, would require the Oklahoma Water Resources Board (OWRB) to conduct a study; revisions to the bill noted that OWRB already makes a decennial study. The bill has been sent to the Senate.

Ogallala Aquifer water use (Oklahoman 3/13/2002) – Water, water everywhere... The OWRB voted unanimously to limit future permits for water withdrawals from the eastern portions of the Ogallala Aquifer. The Board noted that storage in Ellis, Harper, Dewey, and Woodward counties were depleting, while the Panhandle counties had sufficient resources for continued use at current permitting levels. The new rules limit permits to 1.4 acre-feet of water per well, annually. The current limit, which remains in the Panhandle counties, is 2 acre-feet per well per year.

Canadian County to build water pipeline (Oklahoman 3/28/2002) – Scarcity of water supplies and other environmental regulations have prompted the Central Oklahoma Water Resources Authority, which represents Canadian County communities, to seek development of a pipeline to the Arbuckle-Simpson aquifer near Ada. The 100-mile pipeline would be built at a cost of \$200 million. The Water Resources Authority has signed a letter of commitment with PESA LLC, based in Oklahoma City, to develop the pipeline.

State sets phosphorus levels on Scenic Rivers (Oklahoman 3/13/2002) – The OWRB voted to reduce dramatically phosphorus levels in eastern Oklahoma rivers. The plan would reduce levels from the current 2 milligrams per liter to 0.037 milligrams per liter by 2012. Oklahoma officials had been negotiating with Arkansas officials for nearly ten years with no results. Arkansas officials said, after the new regulations were adopted, that they would like an interim standard of 1.2 milligrams per liter – a 40% reduction – and that the Oklahoma target was impossible.

Oklahoma sues chicken farms (Oklahoman 3/17/2002) – Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson said he intends to file lawsuits against five or six poultry companies for environmental damages related to the industry. Edmondson charges that thousands of tons of chicken-litter have damaged Oklahoma water. He is seeking compensation from the companies, which contract to individual farmers for production of chickens.

Arkansas strikes back (Oklahoman 3/29/2002) – Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee suggested that Arkansas should increase its standards for “chlorine pollution” in the Arkansas River, which he attributed to Oklahoma’s petrochemical industry. His comments were in response to Oklahoma’s new standards for phosphorus in several rivers in eastern Oklahoma. The Oklahoman contacted officials with both the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality and the Oklahoma Water Resources Board. The Arkansas official was “unaware of a chlorine problem in the Arkansas River.” Derek Smittee, with OWRB, said the governor may be referring to chlorides – not chlorine. Smittee said that the Arkansas River meets all state standards for chlorides, sulfates, and dissolved solids; standards which are “at least as stringent as the federal government’s.” [Comment: a lesson to elected officials – check your facts BEFORE you speak!]

Personal chemicals pollute waterways (AP 3/13/2002) – pharmaceutical and personal care pollutants – medicines, cleaners, and beauty aids - are finding their ways into water supplies. These substances are unregulated and are difficult to remove during wastewater treatment processes. These chemicals are barely detectable in water supplies, but their aggregate, long-term effects are unknown. The study was performed by the U.S. Geological Survey and reported in the March 15 issue of the journal Environmental Science and Technology.

Endangered species lands shrinking (New York Times 3/20/2002) – Officials in the Bush Administration have asked federal judges to rescind millions of acres from environmental protection. The land was set aside by the Clinton Administration, which was forced to map protected areas by federal court decisions in lawsuits brought by environmental groups. Many such areas were added with insufficient economic analysis of how businesses and landowners would be affected. Federal law requires such analysis, and a spokesman for the Fisheries service summed up: "The interpretation was simple: We would lose."

Norman’s arsenic levels acceptable (Oklahoma Daily 3/15/2002) – New tests of the Norman water supply have shown a decrease in arsenic levels to well below EPA limits. To obtain compliance, Norman discontinued use of several wells west of the railroad tracks. The wells could be used in times of need, but on a routine basis, water will be drawn from Lake Thunderbird and other wells. The EPA revised limits from the current 50 parts per billion to 10 ppb. Communities have until 2006 to come into compliance with the new standards.

The Universe, in Need Of a Good Decorator

By Paul Richard, Special to The Washington Post
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Science has determined, or rather re-determined, the color of the universe, and it turns out to be beige.

Beige?

This is metaphysically disappointing.

Two Johns Hopkins University astronomers, Karl Glazebrook and Ivan Baldry, announced last week that if you averaged out the light from who knows how many stars in 200,000 galaxies, and made the combined glows visible to the human eye, what we'd see is beige.

The color of a pair of khakis washed too many times. The color of a muffin. The color of uncooked spaghetti and industrial carpeting.

White we could have lived with. White light from the stars is democratically inclusive. Newton's prism showed us that it mixes all the colors of the rainbow. White light shining brightly is also the decor of the otherworldly tunnels that people who have had near-death experiences tell us they've been through.

Red is warmth and blood and passion -- that is why red ocher is found in Ice Age graves. Blue is also nice: Blue brings to mind the sky, and the rolling sea, and, of course, the blues.

Some might have hoped for green. In fact, when the astronomers first did their calculations, they discovered that the universe was a "cosmic spectrum green" -- a tone not far from turquoise. This pleasingly evoked the first fresh shoots of springtime, Navajo silver jewelry and the paradisiacal warmth of tropical lagoons. Green would have been fine.

But the scientists announced last week they'd got that color wrong. Flawed software had misled them. Their error is excusable. Harder to forgive is the wholly unpoetic brownish-gray that they now tell us is right.

We expect more from our scientists. And from God. Science and religion are frequently at odds, but not always. They share this: Each can fill the mind with awe.

Walking on waves and parting the Red Sea are memorable miracles. So, too, are the many thousands of neutrinos that, while you read this sentence, are flying through your thumb.

To stop one of those tiny, very fast, nearly massless particles is practically impossible: To make the chances 50-50 you'd have to put into its pathway a chunk of lead so vast that its thickness would be measured in light-years. A ponderous thought.

Though it's true it goes with everything, there's nothing heavy about beige. It's sort of a non-color.

You'd think God could have done better. But that thought feels heretical.

Perhaps there is some profound truth, some troubling cosmic parable, deep within the newfound fact that the hue of His creation is boring, banal, blah.

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